Co-operation in Practice - International

In 2012 the Co-operative Federation of Victoria Ltd (Co-operatives Victoria), the Co-operative College in the UK and the SouthEast Housing Co-operative Ltd co-produced a series of short films on Co-operation in Practice featuring the then Chief Executive Officer and Principal of the Co-operative College Mervyn Wilson – Directors, Education, Governance, International, Members, Principles, Social Enterprises and Values. Filming was undertaken by Trade Creative. For each film the Co-operative College prepared a transcript.

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From those humble beginnings in Rochdale back in 1844 it was staggering how quickly the co-operative model had spread across the world. At the same time that the Rochdale Pioneers were learning from the experience of early failures, and developing their model which became very much the pattern for many others, there were similar experiments going on in other parts of Europe. Schulze-Delitzsch and Raffheisen were looking at poverty in rural areas in particular and developing the models that eventually became the People's Bank and the Credit Unions. And George Jacob Holyoake, one of the great pioneers of co-operation in the UK, wrote up the story of the Rochdale Pioneers a few years after they had successfully developed.

It is incredible to think that back in the 1850s that book was quickly translated into all of the major European languages and the model just migrated around the world. Britain of course at that time was at the heart of an enormous empire, so as people went to work in the various colonies in countries around the world they took the model with them. Over here in Australia we know from our archives that people were even trying to set up co-operative gold mines in the 1860s. We have looked at examples where they were setting up the first co-operatives in South Africa as early as 1863, and then a few years later as our giant Co-operative Wholesale Society established, it set up trading depots around the world, and their employees very quickly set up other co-operatives.

By 1895 a global body called the International Co-operative Alliance had been established to support and encourage co-operatives around the world. The unique characteristic is co-operatives have managed to develop and flourish in all political systems, in all economic systems, irrespective of race and creed, so at the heart of capitalism in the United States we find there are 150 million co-operators. Something like 30 million Americans in rural areas get their electricity through rural electric co-operatives and credit unions in the United States – these were some of the few resilient parts of the financial system at the time of the global financial crisis. If we look globally, we talk of how the top 300 co-operatives alone have a turnover of $1.6trillion, which would make them equivalent to the ninth biggest economy in the world. Over 100 million people work for co-operatives, more than every multi-national put together. And although in Australia co-operatives are often of low visibility in terms of the sector, like other countries, you have co-operatives in finance, in agriculture, in fisheries, in housing, in retail – a whole range of co-operative endeavour, and if we look globally, it is the giant financial co-operatives that are amongst the biggest.

But look at some of the examples about how co-operatives have lifted and kept people out of poverty and helped transform lives. In the 1920s at the time of the last great depression in Atlantic Canada, two radical priests got together to actually talk to communities about how they could improve their lives through co-operation. What became known as the Antagonish movement spawned hundreds of co-operatives that transformed the lives of their communities. In Spain in the Basque country, a region seriously neglected at the time of the Franco regime, another radical priest got together with people to say what are the skills we are losing from here? How do we actually develop those skills and employment? They built what became known as the Mondragon complex, a whole range of co-operatives that are now the sixth biggest employer in Spain and have enterprises in many other countries. If we look at the developing world, co-operatives are now seen as a key part of development strategy. I love the example from Uganda where they are now using technology to support some of the poorest small holders trying to wrest a living out of coffee production. They were always the victims of the middlemen who tried to barter down prices. But now simply using mobile phones and text messages, the poorest farmer, the poorest small holder member of a co-op in the remotest regions of Uganda can know the commodity price and know when the middleman tries to swindle him. He can say 'no, that's the price I require for my commodities'. So the wonderful thing about co-operatives is we now can see them from the most affluent countries still helping people to improve their lives, and how they are becoming more and more a part of a modern twenty-first century economy. That is the great thing about this year, the United Nations have declared it the United Nations International Year of Co-operatives, with the strap line that Co-operative enterprises build a better world. We have got lots of examples here in Australia, but if we look internationally we really can see how co-operative enterprises have improved the lives of over half of humanity and are contributing to building a better world.

Film available at CoOperationdg
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCvnVDdQMYk112jAgJ-pvfFA